

Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” (Gen 1:26)

✠ Lecture VII: The Trinity of God ✠

✠ Introduction:

One day St. Augustine was walking on the sandy beach by the sea. There churned in his mind the mystery of the Holy Trinity. He was talking to himself, “One God, but Three Persons. Three Persons – not three gods but One God. What does it mean? How can it be explained? How can my mind take it in?” And so he was tormenting his mind and beating his brain, when he saw a little boy on the beach. He approached him to see what he was doing. The child had dug a small hole in the sand. With his little hands he was carrying water from the sea and was dumping it in the little hole. St. Augustine asked, “What are you doing, my child?” The child replied, “I want to put all the water of the sea into this hole.” Once more St. Augustine asked, “But is it possible for all the water of this great sea to be contained in this little hole?” And the child asked him in return, “If the water of the finite sea cannot be contained in this little hole, then how can The Infinite Triune God be contained in your mind?” And the child disappeared; he was actually an angel!

The doctrine of The Holy Trinity is not merely an “article of faith” which men are called to “believe.” It is not simply a dogma, which the Church requires its members to “accept in faith.” Neither is the doctrine of The Holy Trinity the invention of scholars and the result of intellectual speculation or philosophical thinking. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity arises from God’s Own revelation about Himself; God being God, all our knowledge of Him comes by divine revelation, for it is impossible for us to know God without His willingness to be known. God is known only as He makes Himself known to us through the revealing and saving agency of His Word and Spirit. God revealed Himself through Himself, through the incarnation of His Son among us as our Saviour and by the power of His Spirit. The Christian doctrine of God is thus inescapably and essentially *Christocentric*, for it pivots upon God’s *self*-revelation and *self*-communication in the incarnation, in an objective manifestation, an imprint of the divine *Hypostasis*, which is identical with the very Being of God Himself.

This does not mean that all our knowledge of God can be reduced to Christology, but that, as there is only one Mediator between God and man, who is Himself both God and Man, and only one revelation of God in which He Himself is its actual content, all authentic knowledge of God is derived and understood in accordance with the incarnate reality of God’s self-revelation in Lord Jesus Christ, and is formulated in doctrinal coherence with Christology. This is to say that doctrinal statements about God are possible and true only when Christologically grounded, for only in Lord Jesus Christ do we really have to do with an objective personal self-revelation of God which bridges the distance between God and us and which is identical with the very Being of God Himself.

It is with the same force that our knowledge and worshipping of God include the Holy Spirit. As He whom the Father sends through the Son to dwell with us and open our mind toward Himself beyond ourselves, and thus to complete the circle of God’s own self-revelation and self-imparting movement in us whereby He enables us to respond to Him in faith and understanding, the Holy Spirit is no less divine than the Son. How could the Spirit pour the love of God into our hearts, how could the Spirit mediate Lord Jesus Christ to us, and how could our Lord Jesus be present to us in the Spirit, if the Spirit were not Himself divine like the Father and the Son and of one and the same Being (*Homoousios*) with them? Like the Son of God the Holy Spirit is no mere cosmic power intermediate between God and the world, but is the very Spirit of God who eternally dwells in Him and in whom God knows Himself, so that for us to know God in His Spirit is to know Him in the hidden depths of His Triune Being as Holy Spirit as well as Father and Son. Apart from the communion of the Holy Spirit we could not enjoy the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father. Only because God has actually made Himself known to us can we speak of Him in this way.

This self-revelation of God to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit provides for us the immediate ground in human existence and history where God may be known as He is in His Triune Reality. The immediate ground on which we actually know God in His historical self-revelation is one and the same with the ultimate ground that God Himself eternally is, for in Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit God is wholly identical with the content of His self-revelation and self-communication. God reveals Himself through Himself, and what God communicates to us is not something of Himself but His very Self, true God from true God. In Him the Revealer and the Revealed, the Giver and the Gift are of one and the same Being. In Lord Jesus Christ God has revealed Himself and given Himself to us unreservedly in the fullness of His divine Reality, in such a way that what He reveals and gives us is grounded in His ultimate Being as God. That is the central truth, the Deity of Lord Jesus Christ, upon which the Christian conception of God and of His saving activity depends, as the great theologians and councils made clear once for all in the fourth century in their formulation of the crucial concept of the *homoosion* applied to the Son and the Spirit as the key truth they had to maintain against threats to the Gospel from every side.

At this point, it is appropriate to introduce the terms ‘immanent or theological Trinity’ and ‘economic Trinity’. The first term refers to our conceptions of God in His eternal Being and the second refers to our conceptions of God that arise out of the economy of God’s saving revelation in history. In the Gospel God does not just appear to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for He really is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Himself, and reveals Himself as such. Therefore, the economic Trinity and theological Trinity are not to be separated from one another for they are locked together in God’s threefold *self*-revelation and *self*-communication to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While for St. Athanasius *economy* and *theology* must be clearly distinguished, they are not to be separated from each other. If the economic Trinity and the theological Trinity were disparate, this would bring into question whether God *Himself* was the actual content of His revelation, and whether God *Himself* was really Lord Jesus Christ reconciling the world to Himself. That is the significance of the term *homoousion* (‘consubstantial’, of one substance, or of one and the same Being with the Father) formulated by the council of Nicea in 325 AD. If there is no real bond in God between the economic Trinity and the theological Trinity, the saving events proclaimed in the economy of the Gospel would be without any divine validity and the doctrine of the Trinity would be lacking any ultimate divine truth. The Trinitarian message of the Gospel tell us that the very contrary is the case, for in Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit we really have to do with the *Lord God Himself* as our Saviour.

When we look into the Trinitarian content of this self-revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *One Being (Ousia), Three Persons (Hypostasis)* we become even more aware of its intrinsically unique and exclusive nature, for to believe in God as a Trinity in His eternal Being, means renouncing every form of Unitarianism as well as of polytheism. In fact to conceive of God as Unity and Trinity, Trinity and Unity, is the most exclusive of all possible conceptions of God, not only because there is no humanly explicable way of thinking of the Three as One and the One as Three, but because of the unique Nature of God who *is* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in His one eternal Being. However, we may and surely must say that the Three Persons are integrated in the One Being and the One Being is integrated in the Three Divine Persons, such that there is no One Being apart from the Three Persons, and there are no Three divine Persons apart from the One Being. The Holy Trinity is a Unity and the Unity is a Trinity, for God *is* Triune in Himself and it is essentially in a triune way that God makes Himself known to us.

In our knowing of the Triunity of God, we are engaged in a kind of knowing in which we move from the ‘whole’ to the ‘parts’, and from the ‘parts’ to the ‘whole’, understanding the ‘parts’ in the light of the ‘whole’ and the ‘whole’ in the light of the ‘parts’. This way of speaking of the ‘whole’ and ‘parts’, however, is not strictly appropriate to God’s Triune self-revelation as Unity and Trinity and Trinity and Unity, for the three divine Persons may not be thought of as ‘parts’ of the Trinity nor may the Trinity be thought of as a ‘whole’ composed of ‘parts’. Neither is it appropriate to our apprehension of the Holy Trinity, although it may be more appropriate when we are speaking of the ‘doctrine’ of the Trinity as a whole and the distinct ‘doctrines’ of the Father, of the son, and of the Holy Spirit.

It must also be pointed out, however, that while the Triune God reveals Himself as a whole and while it is as a whole that God is the object of our knowing, this does not mean that we can know Him wholly or have a comprehensive knowledge of Him, for in His transcendent wholeness, God eludes our comprehension. What God does allow us to apprehend of Himself breaks through the narrow confines of our grasp, so that in the very act of *apprehending* something of Him we know that we are incapable of *comprehending* Him. Even in His condescension to reveal Himself to us God infinitely exceeds what we can grasp or conceive, so that our knowledge of the whole God cannot but be ‘in part’ or ‘partial’ as St. Paul said, “Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.” (1 Cor 13:12)

All this means that in a faithful account of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity our thoughts cannot but engage in a deep circular movement from Unity to Trinity and from Trinity to Unity, for we are unable to speak of the whole Trinity without already speaking of the three particular Persons of the Trinity or to speak of any of the three Persons without presuming knowledge of the whole Triunity, for God is only God as He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was said above, with some reservation, that in our knowing of the Triunity of God we engage in a kind of knowing in which we move from the ‘whole’ to the ‘parts’ and from the ‘parts’ to the ‘whole’. The reason for the reservation is due to the fact that the Oneness of the Holy Trinity is a three-in-oneness, that is, a wholeness which includes the three divine Persons such that each divine Person is Himself whole God, so that the usual way of thinking in terms of the whole and the parts does not apply. As St. Gregory Nazianzen said, “*No sooner do I place before the mind the One, than I am surrounded by the splendor of the Three. No sooner do I distinguish the Three, than I am brought back to the One. When any one of the Three appears to me I think of Him as a whole; my eyes are filled and the greater part escapes my eye. I cannot comprehend the magnitude of the One, so as to impart a greater greatness to the Rest. When, again, I consider the Three together, I perceive but one splendor, and I cannot divide or measure the light that is one.*” (Oration XL. *In sanctum baptisma*, 41, PG 36:417C.)

The fathers and theologians of the Early Church reflected upon the fact that, since the proof of an unknown reality is its own evidence and the conceptual assent or basic belief it calls forth from people, the right way for people to break through into a completely new realm of meaning or truth is the way of *faith* – hence the principle widely promulgated in the Church: ‘*Unless you believe you will not understand.*’ This is certainly the case whenever we have to do with *ultimates* which carry their own authority calling for the intelligent commitment of belief, and provide the irreducible ground upon which rational knowledge and theological formulation take place.

* This lecture is adapted from *The Christian Doctrine of God One Being Three Persons* by T. F. Torrance